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ABSTRACT

The monograph describes the progress that has been made in exceptional child education in Alabama during the last decade and addresses needed areas of improvement. Brief sections focus on the following items: financing special education programs, instructional programing in local education agencies, individualized education plans, diagnosis of exceptional children, teacher education, certification, least restrictive environment, vocational education, facilities, advocacy organizations, labeling, service delivery model, adapted physical education, regular education/special education interaction, transportation, gifted and talented, speech, multihandicapped, mental retardation, learning disabilities, emotional conflict, deaf and blind, preschool education, and post school programing. (SBH)

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EXCEPTIONAL CHILD EDUCATION IN ALABAMA: THE STATE OF THE ART

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EXCEPTIONAL CHILD EDUCATION IN ALABAMA: THE STATE OF THE ART

As 1979 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of the Child, an excellent opportunity has been provided for Alabamians to reexamine their commitment to exceptional child education. Education for exceptional children in Alabama has been improving significantly on an annual basis since the enactment of Act 106--Alabama's Exceptional Child Act--in 1971. The enactment by Congress of P.L. 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act) in 1975 added further financial and programmatic emphasis to the appropriate diagnosis, placement, and instruction of exceptional children. Although this legislation has brought about necessary and constructive change, many exceptional children in Alabama are presently receiving an inappropriate or inadequate education. Of a projected 112,000 exceptional children in Alabama an estimated 74,600 are being properly served. The purpose of this monograph is to describe the progress that has been made in exceptional child education in Alabama during the last decade as well as to address needed areas of improvement.

Item: Financing Special Education Programs

Progress: The quality of exceptional child education is directly related to the degree of financial commitment the State and federal governments are prepared to provide. At this time more money is being spent for special education than ever before in the history of the profession. However, additional funding is needed due to the number of exceptional children and the complexity of their needs.

Instruction must be individualized and special instructional materials must be provided. Facilities are improved, but are still inadequate in many instances. Additional teacher education programs are needed in some areas of exceptionality. State and federal laws require full funding of exceptional child education. Advocacy organizations may eventually be active in requesting that the Courts require that the laws be fully implemented.

Recommendation: Additional State and federal funding are necessary if Act 106 and P.L. 94-142 are to be fully implemented. This could result from legislative and congressional action, or if need be, from litigation brought by advocacy organizations requesting that the Courts require implementation of existing laws. The State should act immediately to fund its existing laws rather than have the Courts mandate their implementation.

Item: Instructional Programming in Local Education Agencies

Progress: The quality of exceptional child education programs in local education agencies in Alabama is at an all-time high. More exceptional children in more exceptionalities are being served than ever before. Every exceptional child, regardless of where he lives, is legally entitled to a free and appropriate public education. The child's rights are fully guaranteed. Problems that do exist result primarily from a lack of finding qualified personnel, funding, and inadequate facilities. Excessive paperwork is also a frequent complaint (due to government regulations).

Recommendation: Increased funding, more teacher education programs, and improved facilities are the three most urgent needs of local special education programs. A streamlining of state and federal regulations

would be welcomed by local school personnel.

Item: Public Interpretation of Special Education Programs

Progress: Due to the efforts of the Program for Exceptional Children and Youth, State Department of Education, various advocacy organizations at the State and national levels, and local professionals, public concern over the welfare of exceptional children is experiencing widespread visibility. Whether this concern can be eventually translated into increased funding of special education programs remains to be seen. Public support is the single most significant factor contributing to the growth and development of special education.

Recommendation: The needs of exceptional children in Alabama should continue to be expressed to the public. Perhaps their support can eventually result in adequate funding in order that existing laws can be fully implemented.

Item: Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)

Progress: Individualized education plans (IEPs) are written outlines of a child's present educational placement, achievement levels, and expected outcomes for the academic year. The IEPs which are required by P.L. 94-142 provide for input by numerous school personnel and the child's parents. As their popularity has been steadily increasing since 1977 (the first year they were required), many parents of "normal" children are expressing interest in being kept informed of their child's progress in a similar fashion.

Recommendation: There should be more active parental input in the development of IEPs. Regional workshops sponsored by the State Department of Education or advocacy organizations could be employed

to prepare parents to make increased contributions in terms of the development of their child's IEP.

Item: Parent Rights

Progress: Never before in the history of education have parents been afforded the rights, privileges, opportunities, and responsibilities that are provided in P.L. 94-142. Parents are legally included in every important decision made during the child's educational career. Specific due process procedures allow fo parents to challenge decisions where disagreement exists. Yet many parents, either through neglect, misinformation, or apathy, fail to exercise their rights.

Recommendation: To accompany their many rights, parents need to become better informed consumers in order to make more constructive contributions to the educational process. Parents need to learn to assume responsibility as they become co-partners with professional educators.

Item: Diagnosis of Exceptional Children

Progress: Educational diagnosticians are better equipped today to assess the needs of exceptional children than at any time in history. The State Board of Education recently approved new standards for the training of educational diagnosticians which should further improve the quality of these personnel. Increased reliance on batteries of assessment instruments (as opposed to the use of a single test) has made identification of exceptional children more reliable, and hence more protective of the child and his educational programming.

Recommendation: Continued improvement in the assessment of exceptional children from cultural minorities is needed. Too frequently, diagnostic instruments have been normed on the middle class without regard to ethnic or cultural differences. More qualified educational diagnosticians are needed as are additional preparation programs in universities (that conform to the new State Board standards).

Item: Teacher Education

Progress: Improvements in the number and quality of teacher education programs in special education during the past decade has been significant. This is particularly true in certain areas of exceptionality such as mental retardation and learning disabilities. Improvements in teacher education standards for all areas of education, including special education, will have a positive impact on the quality of programs.

Recommendation: Continued growth in the development of teacher education programs, particularly in the lower incidence areas such as deaf and blind, is needed. Preparation programs should specifically address the needs of secondary and preschool level children. More recruitment of certified teachers in the rural school systems is also needed. Additional funding to allow for compliance with the State Board of Education's new teacher education standards is another need.

Item: Certification

Progress: The initial standards for special education teacher education programs that were adopted in 1966 have been improved substantially on several occasions. The most recent improvement was the

adoption of a comprehensive set of teacher education standards for teachers in all areas of education by the State Board of Education. Perhaps the most significant of all the new requirements is the stipulation that regular educators must complete a course in special education before receiving certification. This should increase the amount of communication that occurs between regular and special education and should facilitate the instructional process for "mainstreamed" exceptional children.

Recommendation: Teachers should be encouraged to earn certification in as many areas of exceptionality as possible. The State Board of Education should take whatever action is necessary to encourage interrelated programs that allow for multiple certifications. Another area of related need is the development of certification standards that specifically designed for special education coordinators.

Item: Least Restrictive Environment

Progress: As a result of P.L. 94-142, exceptional children are palced in the least restrictive environment in terms of their educational program. This means that exceptional children are to be placed in the most "normal" environment in which they can succeed. Interaction with non-handicapped children must be encouraged to the maximum extent appropriate. When disagreements exist as to what constitutes a least restrictive environment placement, due process safeguards are provided to insure the rights of the child.

Recommendation: Additional research is needed to determine the appropriateness of segregated or centralized facilities for low incidence exceptionalities. Many parents prefer this type of program while others desire that their child be served in a typical school setting.

Item: Vocational Education

Vocational educators and special educators continue to work together to provide appropriate educational programs in the area of vocational education for exceptional children. For too many years the area of secondary programming, particularly in terms of vocational emphasis, has been neglected. Ten percent of all vocational education monies is earmarked for handicapped children. Related vocational instruction is being provided for exceptional children to accompany job training skills. Vocational education is recognized as an extremely important area of the curriculum as independent living is a key objective in educational programming for exceptional children.

Recommendation: More on-the-job training is needed, particularly at the high school level. Vocational Training should continue on into the adult years if necessary. Additional planning is needed as is earlier emphasis on career education during the elementary years. Job activity centers (sheltered workshops) are also needed for the moderately handicapped individual.

Item: Facilities

Progress: More exceptional children are housed in regular school buildings than ever before. However, frequently, the rooms are small and inadequately furnished. Funding continues to be the major problem. This problem is not unique to special education, but is applicable to all areas of education. The least restricitve

environment component of P.L. 94-142 is requiring that many children who were previously served in centralized facilities be absorbed in regular school buildings. Section 504 of the 1978 Amendments to the 1973 Vocational Rehabilitation Act requires the removal of architectural barriers (for the physically handicapped).

Recommendation: Additional funding is needed to relieve overcrowded conditions in the public schools of Alabama and to allow for compliance with Section 504.

Item: Advocacy Organizations

Progress: Many organizations such as the Alabama Association for Retarded Citizens, the Alabama Federation of the Council for Exceptional Children, United Cerebral Palsy, and others have joined forces to form the Exceptional Children and Youth Education Association. These organizations provide an active lobbying body on behalf of exceptional children in presenting the views and opinions of their respective memberships. In addition to these advocacy groups comprised of parents, concerned citizens, and professionals, the Alabama Developmental Disabilities Advocacy Program provides free legal service to parents of exceptional children when questions of legal rights arise.

Recommendation: The Exceptional Children and Youth Education Association, the Alabama Developmental Disabilities Advocacy Program, and other concerned persons should work closely with the State Board of Education, the Legislature, the Attorney General's Office, and the Governor's Office in reaching an agreement as to how Act 106 and P.L. 94-142 can be fully implemented. If negotiated settlements cannot be reached, then ensuing litigation may result.

Item: Labeling

Progress: Labeling of exceptional children has been a problem for several years to which there is no easy solution. Labeling was initially used for administrative and funding purposes. However, it eventually was used to identify children on a routine basis at the classroom level. In recent years the professional literature has stressed a non-categorical approach (in which the use of labels is discarded). However plans to implement this approach have not been highly successful to date.

Recommendation: Mildly handicapped children should not be labeled; yet they need and should receive individualized instruction. Perhaps their individualized education plan should contain a description of their functioning level rather than a label. (The IEP would state that the child has difficulty with letter reversals and laterality, rather than stating that the child is a learning disabled child.) Criteria for eligibility of services would continue according to present guidelines.

Item: Service Delivery Model

Progress: More exceptional children in Alabama are served in resource rooms than in self-contained classrooms. The emphasis is on maintaining the child in the regular program to the maximum extent appropriate and serving him in a resource room in those academic areas where difficulties are experienced. The resource room approach also minimizes the use of labeling and allows for more children to be served per dollar expended. An additional advantage is that handicapped children are afforded an opportunity to interact with non-handicapped children

to the maximum extent appropriate for the individual child.

Item: Adapted Physical Education

Progress: Adapted physical education is required to be a component of an exceptional child's IEP if the child is not able to participate in the regular physical education program. Much progress has been made in this area; however, additional qualified teachers are needed. The positive relationship between a structured physical education program (which results in normal growth and development) and increased mental growth has been demonstrated repeatedly in various research studies.

Recommendation: Additional teacher education programs and qualified teachers in adapted physical education are needed. Increased funding for teacher education in this area is needed also.

Item: Regular Education/Special Education Interaction

Progress: With the increased emphasis on placing exceptional children in the least restrictive environment (or in the regular program whenever possible), the need for regular educators to understand the identification and instruction of exceptional children is highly apparent. A recent State Board of Education resolution requiring that regular educators complete a special education course as a requisite for certification is a constructive action. Alabama has thus become a national leader in encouraging communication and a working relationship between regular and special education.

Recommendation: Regular education and special education must make every effort to work together in meeting the needs of all children, including those who are identified as exceptional. Additional legislative funding should be provided to assist institutions of higher education with offering additional sections of the introductory special education course in order to effectively implement the State Board of Education resolution.

Item: Transportation

Progress: Transportation of exceptional children, particularly the moderately, severely, and profoundly handicapped, has made substantial progress in recent years. School buses that contain ramps, modified wheelchairs, removal of architectural barriers, and better prepared paraprofessionals (many of whom drive school buses) have all contributed to improve transportation problems. However, coordinators of special education and parents both continue to express concern over the issue of transportation. This is particularly true in rural areas and exceptionalities with a relatively low incidence.

Recommendation: Additional funding is needed in order to provide appropriate buses, ramps, wheelchairs, paraprofessionals, and other items related to transportation.

Item: Gifted and Talented

Progress: Gifted and talented is an area of exceptionality that is mandated in Alabama by Act 106 (It is not included in P.L. 94-142.). Growth in this area has been hampered by a lack of certified teachers, teacher training programs, and money to employ teachers. The State is fortunate to have excellent leadership in this area and

much progress is expected in the future.

Recommendation: As many gifted children have not yet been identified, much work in diagnosis is needed. As very few programs address the needs of talented children, more are needed. Additional teacher education programs are needed as is increased emphasis on gifted programming at the secondary level. Another area of need is the identification of gifted children from cultural minorities.

Item: Speech

Progress: As many exceptional children also experience difficulty with a speech or language disorder, the necessity for speech therapy with exceptional children has gained increased visibility. A major problem has been a lack of adequately trained speech therapists, especially in the rural areas of the State. The speech therapists that do exist generally appear to do an excellent job. Many professionals believe that speech therapists are frequently better trained than are professionals in the other areas of exceptionality. Speech therapy, when required, is stated on the child's IEP.

Recommendation: Additional preparation programs in the area of speech therapy are needed. Recruitment of speech therapists in rural areas is also an area of recognized need. Perhaps an employment bureau operated by the State Department of Education or an advocacy organization would be a realistic suggestion.

Item: Multi-Handicapped

Progress: Considerable progress has been made in recent years in terms of integrating the multiply-handicapped child into the regular classroom. As many of these children experience primarily physical

disabilities, slight modifications in the physical structure of the facility allows these children to attend the regular program. This is particularly true when retardation or other intellectually limiting disabilities are not present. A lack of qualified teachers in this area has also been a disadvantage in terms of offering programs for those children who cannot negotiate the regular classroom. Removal of architectural barriers (to comply with Section 504) would also be an asset to programming for this specific population.

Recommendation: The multiply-handicapped child should attend the regular program whenever possible. Modifications in the physical structure should be made to comply with Section 504 and permit maximum interaction with non-handicapped populations. Additonal qualified teachers are also needed.

Item: Mental Retardation

Progress: As mental retardation has been a forerunner among the various exceptionalities, progress in this area has been substantial. Most retarded children in Alabama are being appropriately served at the present time. Where deficiencies exist, they are due to the lack of qualified teachers. This is particularly true in rural areas and for the more severely retarded children. More teacher training programs exist in Alabama in the area of retardation than in any of the other exceptionalities. The same is true of actual classroom programs and number of children served. Additional research is needed as to the causes of retardation, particularly among the moderately, severely, and profoundly retarded populations. Appropriate service delivery models for the mildly retarded are also another area of recognized need.

Recommendation: Labeling of the mildly retarded child should become a practice of the past. Operational descriptions of the child's academic difficulties should suffice to comply with regulations stated in the public laws. While some resistance may exist to this recommdation, the child should benefit from limiting the use of labels. Attraction of certified teachers to rural areas, particularly in the moderately, severely, and profoundly handicapped areas,is needed. Research should continue as to identifying and correcting causes of mental retardation.

Item: Learning Disabilities

Progress: More progress has occurred in the area of learning disabilities during the last five years than any of the other areas of exceptionality. The public appears to be quicker to accept the label of learning disabilities than that of retardation. Most children who are identified as having specific learning disabilities have normal or above normal intelligence. Emotional problems are relatively common among the learning disabled population.

Recommendation: Additonal expertise is needed by educational diagnosticians in terms of identifying specific learning disabilities. Once disabilities are recognized, the diagnosticians should become more adept at making educational recommendations for the child's IEP. (Classroom teachers in the area of learning disabilities probably are the most skilled teachers in terms of their assessment skills.) Additional teachers are also needed in learning disabilities. As is the case with mental retardation and emotional conflict, children with mild learning disabilities should be described in operational terms (rather than with the use of a label).

Item: Emotional Conflict

Progress: Progress in the area of emotional conflict (or emotional disturbance or behavior disorders as it is referred to in some states) has been relatively slow in Alabama. Perhaps the area has had more of a stigma attached to it than some of the other exceptionalities. However, during the last couple of years, Alabama has been significant strides in this area. Additional programmatic growth and development is expected in the near future. Major problems have been in terms of a lack of teacher education programs, qualified teachers, an acceptable service delivery model, disagreement as to what constitutes diagnosis of a child in conflict, and the stigma of experiencing an emotional disorder.

Recommendation: There are some children experiencing emotional disturbances who should not be served by the public schools. They may not be in touch with reality and are in need of professional treatment (preferably by a psychiatrist) prior to being receptive to educational instruction. Whether the child is in need of appropriate treatment or education, the child's needs and services should be stated on his IEP. Better trained educational diagnosticians are needed as are adequate criteria for diagnosis. As stated in the areas of mild retardation and learning disabilities, labeling should be minimized. The use of operational or functional descriptions of the child's behavior should suffice to comply with federal and state regulations.

Item: Deaf and Blind (Including Hard-of-Hearing and Partially-Sighted)

Progress: Most children with auditory or visual impairments in Alabama are receiving appropriate educational services. However, some disagreement exists among professionals and among parents as to what constitutes least restrictive environment for these children. Historically, most of these children have been served in residential placements. (In Alabama, this has been at the Alabama School for the Deaf and Blind in Talladega.) Public Law 94-142 specifically says that exceptional children must be served in the school that they would attend if they were not handicapped and in the school as close to their home as possible. In addition, the federal regulations state that exceptional children should interact with non-handicapped children to the maximum extent appropriate. Many parents prefer that their child be provided an appropriate education in their neighborhood school, while others are of the opinion that a centralized location (in Talladega) is preferable to anything that could be provided locally.

Recommendation: Local school officials and parents of auditorially and visually impaired children should meet and discuss the child's need for appropriate educational programming. If there is not any reasonable justification as to why the child cannot be provided an appropriate education at the local level (lack of certified teachers, money, or facilities is not an adequate excuse), then a local program must be legally provided. Those persons involved should reach a consensus as to what type of educational placement is best for the child and should so stipulate on the child's IEP. The child's opinion should be a major consideration in the decision making process whenever possible.

Item: Pre-School Education for Exceptional Children

Progress: Progress in the area of pre-school education for exceptional children has been historically slow. Disagreement exists among professionals as to the value of early identification. While many professionals believe that early identification gives the child a "headstart" in overcoming his deficiencies (Much research supports this contention, particularly where cultural factors are involved.), other professionals believe that the child deserves a chance to fail on his own first---prior to being labeled. P.L. 94-142 provides a financial incentive for school systems that are willing to initiate programs for pre-school children who are identified as being exceptional.

Recommendation: Additional research is needed to identify those variables that contribute to constructive outcomes of early identification of exceptional children. Federal regulations require that once a school system serves half of its "normal" pre-school children, that is must also serve all of its handicapped pre-school population. Therefore, the relative value of early programming for handicapped children needs to be determined as soon as possible.

Item: Post-School Programming for the Handicapped

Progress: Although public schools are not responsible for education of the handicapped after they pass a certain age, many exceptional adults continue to need educational programs. Programs of a vocational nature are particularly needed. In Alabama, most of the post-school programming for the handicapped is conducted through local mental health agencies. School systems have often

negligent in conducting follow-up studies of their handicapped populations after they leave school.

Recommendation: Additional post-school programs for the handicapped are needed. Mental health agencies and public schools should communicate and work together whenever possible to meet the needs of handicapped adults. Vocational programming should be stressed.

The areas that have been addressed in this monograph comprise the majority of issues and concerns expressed during the last year by special educators, parents, and concerned citizens. Sharing these concerns with the general public should serve to enlighten the perspectives of people and hopefully to eventually improve the quality of educational programming for exceptional children of all ages. If this is the case, then the International Year of the Child has served a useful and constructive purpose. Someone once said that we all need to "leave our footprints in the sands of time". Working with exceptional children will provide us with that opportunity.